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Author(s): Jack R. Harlan

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Lettuce and the Sycomore: Sex and Romance in Ancient Egypt¹

JACK R. HARLAN²

In ancient Egypt, lettuce was considered an aphrodisiac and was featured in the yearly festival of Min, an ithyphallic god of fertility and procreation. The Greeks considered it an antiaphrodisiac and its use as a soporific continued into this century. The sycomore fig has a highly specialized fertilization biology, but does not produce seed in Egypt for want of the proper species of wasp. Ripening has been hastened since ancient times by gashing the syconia. To the ancient Egyptians it was a sacred trysting tree inhabited by the goddess of love and was the focus of a body of love poetry. Some selected verses are presented.

The Crop Evolution Laboratory at the University of Illinois has traced the origins and evolution of a number of crops, mostly cereals and legumes, back into the mists of prehistory. This inquiry is set almost entirely in the historical time range and deals as much with human perceptions as with biological evolution. It actually began with a field trip of my class on "Crops and Man" to the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago. That year, a new exhibit had opened with a reconstructed Egyptian tomb (the original stones moved many years ago from Egypt to Chicago) and a hand-painted copy of murals from Nacht's tomb. Among the offerings shown in Nacht's tomb is a strange plant consisting of a short stalk with leaf scars and blue, pointed leaves, said by some scholars to be lettuce (Fig. 1). Blue lettuce? Leaves linear attenuate? Other paintings showed the plant to be as tall as a man including an ostrich plume headdress (Fig. 2). This is lettuce? My curiosity was aroused and the hunt was on. What follows is an abbreviated sketch of the results. The investigations into the sycomore came in part from observing the processing of tomatoes in south Florida where I used to go to pollinate a winter nursery. Is the connection obvious? Read on!

LETTUCE (SEX)

The first step was to find out what other people thought the plant was. The results of an incomplete survey are shown in Table 1. One may conclude that opinions of scholars on the subject are of little help. I have, however, considerable confidence in Schweinfurth as a botanist, and if he thought the plant was lettuce, one should pay attention. Schweinfurth did not set forth his argument in print, but Keimer (1924a) produced a very convincing one which was elaborated elegantly by Gauthier (1931). To understand the argument one must follow mural chronology in some detail and trace the stylization that takes place over time.

The plant is shown in 12th dynasty tombs at Beni Hasan (Newberry, 1893) as a garden plant (Fig. 3). Here we see a sketch of pot irrigation: one man carrying

¹ Distinguished Economic Botanist's address delivered 13 August 1985 at Twenty-sixth Meeting, Society for Economic Botany, meeting jointly with the Botanical Society of America at the University of Florida, Gainesville, FL.

² Crop Evolution Laboratory, Agronomy Department, University of Illinois, Urbana, IL 61801.

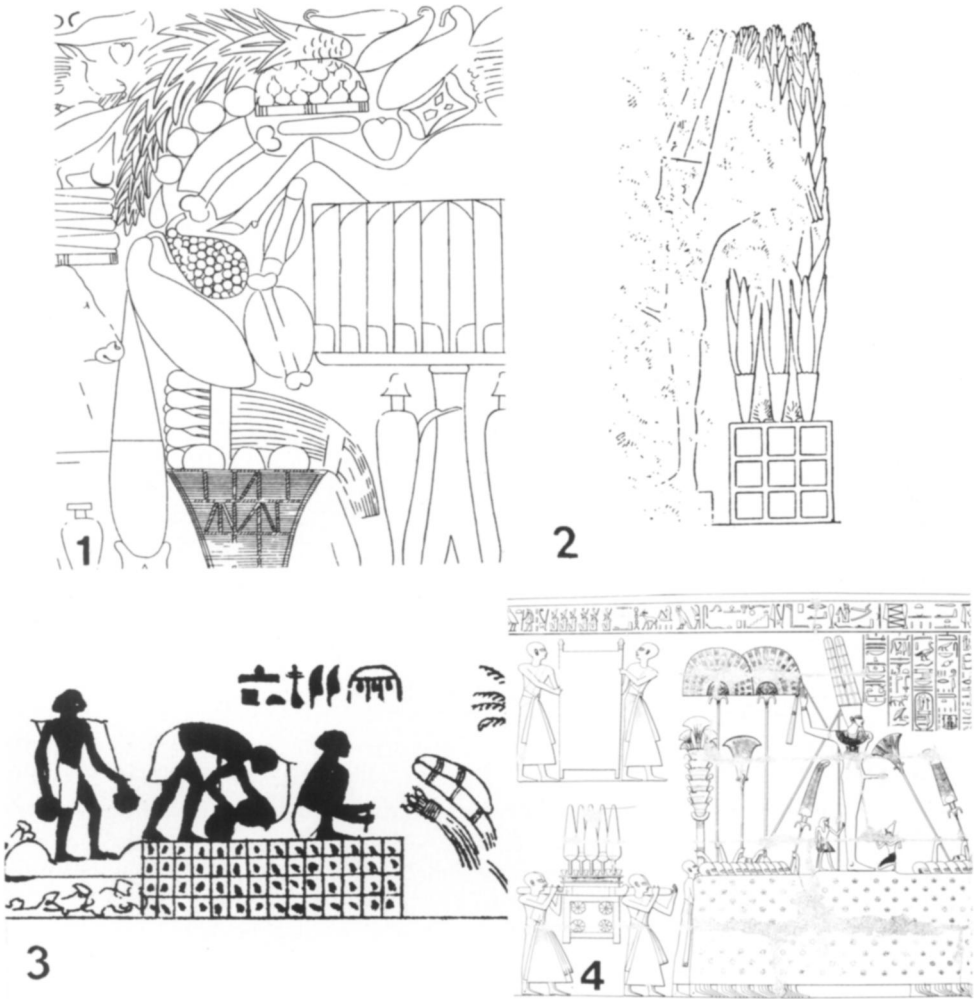


Fig. 1–4. Fig. 1. Offerings in rock tomb of Meir, Chapel B, No. 2 (Blackman, 1915, vol. 2, plate X). The plant at the top with pointed leaves and stem with leaf scars is lettuce. Fig. 2. The fertility god Min with erect lettuce behind him and erect phallus before. The stylized lettuce stands on stylized checkerboard representation of a garden. From Koptos (Keimer, 1924a, p. 142). Fig. 3. Garden scene showing pot irrigation and garden produce, lettuce and leeks, Beni Hasan, tomb 3 (Newberry, 1893, plate 29). Fig. 4. Part of festival of Min with men carrying erect lettuce plants on platform with stylized representation of checkerboard garden. They follow the statue of Min in the procession. University of Chicago, Medinet Habu, vol. 4, plate 201.

two filled pots on a pole across his shoulders, a second dumping his pots onto a checkerboard garden, another tending the garden either weeding or transplanting, and a bunch of the produce, shown above, right. The checkerboard represents planted areas surrounded by low ridges or bunds to hold the water and let it soak in. This system is in common use all over the Near East today, including Egypt. The checkerboard garden symbol follows the lettuce as both become more and more stylized. By the 18th dynasty both have become so stylized as to be hardly

TABLE 1. IDENTIFICATIONS OF "THE PLANT" SHOWN ON EGYPTIAN MURALS.

Trees in general: Lanzone (1885/6, reprinted 1974); Müller (1906); Reinach (1910); Tiele (1882); Wilkinson (1837); also Jéquier and Jollois and Devillier cited in Gauthier (1931).
Trees specific: Drexler (in Roscher 1884/86) cypress; Evans (1901) cypress; Gayet (in Gauthier, 1931) <i>Mimusops</i> ; Meyer (1909) cypress; Petrie (in Gauthier, 1931) palm spathe; Rochemonteix (in Gauthier, 1931) sycamore; Saint-Clair (in Gauthier, 1931) <i>Ficus</i> .
Others: Daressy (1900) lettuce; Foucart (in Gauthier, 1931) sorghum; Gauthier (1931) lettuce; Keimer (1924a) lettuce; Loret (1892) lettuce; Newberry (1893) flax; Rosellini (1832–44) radish, palm heart; Schweinfurth (in Keimer, 1924a) lettuce; Unger (in Gauthier, 1931) artichoke; Wilkinson (1854) lotus; Woenig (1886) beet, artichoke.

recognizable if the evolution of the symbols has not been followed (Gauthier, 1931; Darby et al., 1977).

Space and cost make it impossible to reproduce the whole story in figures but it is well developed by Keimer (1924a) and Gauthier (1931). In other murals, "the plant" is shown in checkerboard context being harvested with a digging stick or a sickle, effectively ruling out the tree theories.

Most important, however, is the association of lettuce with the god Min (later confounded with Amon). Min was a popular god in vogue from the Old Kingdom into Hellenistic times. He had a nome devoted to him, a number of temples consecrated to him, and was lord of the desert, the lightning, and the sandstorm. More importantly, he was a god of fertility and procreation. He is shown in a variety of configurations, but the main features of his representations are: an ostrich feather headdress, a scourge or flagellum, signifying power, a checkerboard stand or an offering stand with tall, erect lettuce plants behind him and an erect phallus before him (Bleeker, 1956). The god is depicted many times on temple or tomb walls, but if you have seen one Min, you have pretty well seen them all. The lettuce plants behind him, however, are shown in a great variety of treatments causing no end of confusion for scholars over the years.

There was a yearly harvest festival devoted to Min, usually in the first month of summer by the Egyptian calendar. The ceremony is depicted in detail on buildings constructed for Ramses II, Ramses III, Herihor, Seti I, Amenhotep III, Sosestris, and Thutmose III (Univ. Chicago, 1940). That of Ramses III is the most complete, but where sections have been defaced, extrapolations can be made from the other reliefs (Univ. Chicago, 1940, vol. IV, plates 193–249). The ceremony involves the following six episodes each showing the king in exaggerated size compared to his subjects.

1. The king sets out in procession carried in a sort of palanquin, preceded and followed by a retinue of priests, singers, dancers, and functionaries of various kinds.

2. He arrives at the temple that houses a statue of Min and performs a rite, presenting offerings and pouring out a libation on them. At this point Min is his usual ithyphallic self but does not have the lettuces behind him. Instead there is a symbol suggesting a round African house and bovid horns.

3. The procession leaves the temple carrying the statue of Min with additional dignitaries, musicians, and participants in public parade. A white bull precedes them, and retainers carry erect lettuces on a platform with checkerboard ornamentation behind the statue.

4. Four birds are released to fly to the four cardinal points of the earth, presumably to carry news of the celebration.



5. The king ceremonially cuts a sheaf of emmer wheat with a sickle symbolic of the harvest now beginning, and the bull is sacrificed.

6. Min is returned to his place in the temple; the king performs another rite of consecration, and this time Min has lettuces behind him.

Other participants include the queen, in the case of Ramses III without a name in her cartouche, and a black "priest." Min, himself, is sometimes shown black, suggesting along with the African house and horns that the ceremony may have originated in Black Africa, although lettuce is not a plant of tropical Africa.

Parading an image of a god in solemn procession was common in Egyptian religious celebrations. Sometimes the statues were made of stone and enormously heavy. This posed no great problem for the Egyptians; they mounted heavy stones on sledges and minimized friction with Nile mud. The procedure is shown a number of times on mural reliefs (Fig. 5). Often, only a few men were required to move a stone many tons in weight. The key to the operation is a little felahin with a jug of water making mud for the sledge to skid over (Fig. 5) (Montet, 1964).

The form of the lettuce shown on ancient Egyptian walls, is, of course, very different from what we can buy at the supermarket today. Plant breeders, both ancient and modern, have brought about great changes from the wild *Lactuca scariola* L. (or *L. serriola* Torner). The wild form is erect, the leaves are blueish with spiny leaves, the seeds shatter at maturity, and the plant is suffused with latex and very bitter (Helm, 1954). As Ryder and Whitaker (1976, p. 39) point out "The emphasis of early human selection must have been on non-shattering seedheads, absence of early flowering (bolting), non-spininess, decrease in latex content and increase in seed size, as well as on the hearting character." Lettuce was grown by the Egyptians for its oil, and lettuce seed oil was a fairly important commodity earlier in this century (Bonaparte, 1901; Milad, 1920). The oil varieties are still grown to some extent, but are bitter and not eaten as vegetables. Keimer (1924b) figures an Egyptian cultivar grown in the Botanical Garden at Berlin-Dahlem 1.5 m high and with appressed strap-like leaves. The Chinese selected lettuce for its stalk; the stem lettuce has reduced leaves but a stem up to 1 m in length (Herklots, 1972).

The Greeks associated Min with Pan because they were both ithyphallic gods, but they were certainly not equivalent. It would be unfair and inaccurate to interpret ithyphally as some sort of pornography. The symbolism is much too profound for that. We are dealing with the divine source of all life, a celebration of our very existence and all that is good and beautiful. As Gauthier (1931, p. 138) pointed out, the sign  (*nefer*), or  for emphasis, can mean "phallus" as well as beauty, pride, glory, strength, vigor, good, happy, excellent, etc. According to Diodorus Siculus (1933, IV, 6) there is a connection between Min and the origin of agriculture and the consequent rise of civilization. It was Isis who taught men how to cultivate wheat and barley and her husband/brother Osiris who forbade men from butchering and eating one another and taught them to live by civilized law. The Titans conspired against Osiris, killed him and dismembered the corpse. Isis tracked down the murderers, slew them and brought the pieces of the body together—all except the phallus that the Titans had thrown into the river. Isis presented the body of Osiris to the priests with the instructions that an

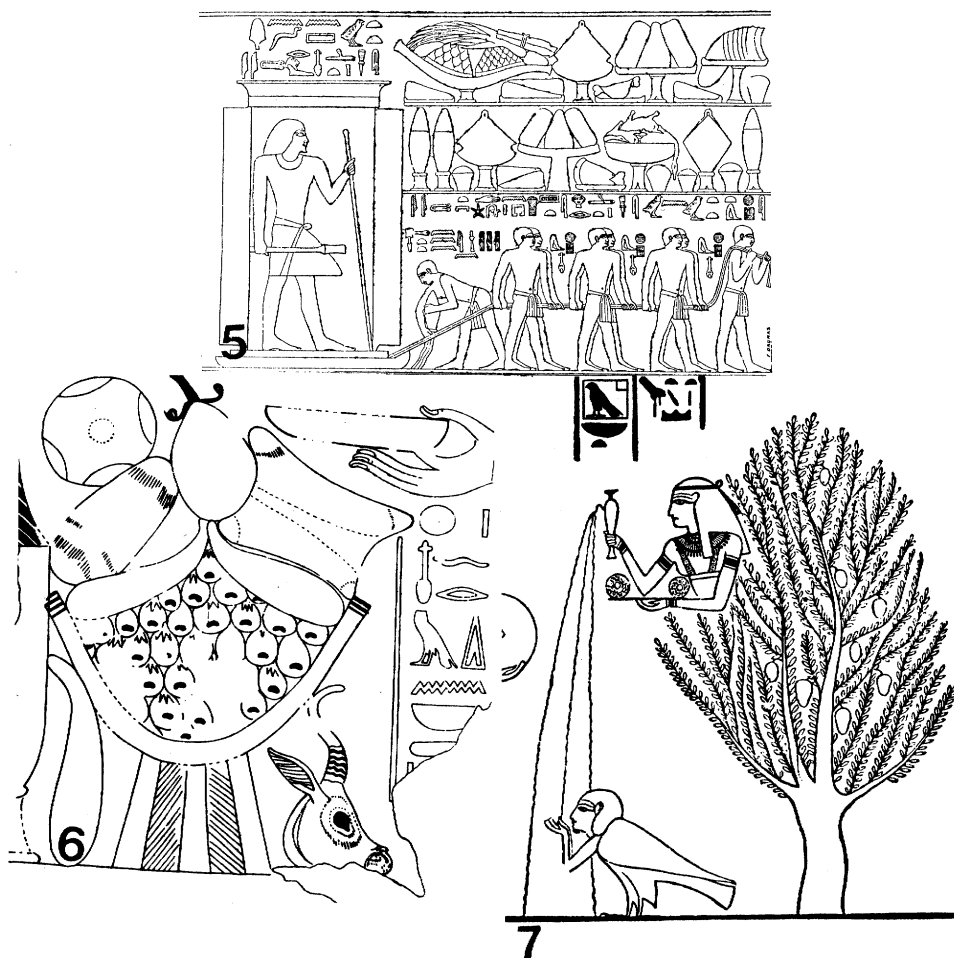


Fig. 5-7. Fig. 5. Moving heavy stone statue, tomb of Ti, corridor II, east (Montet, 1925, fig. 48, p. 388). The key to easy transport is the small figure in front pouring water to keep the mud pathway slippery. Note bunch of lettuce in upper register. Fig. 6. Offering stand with gashed sycomore "fruits" (Davies, 1913, plate 26). Fig. 7. Goddess of the sycomore pouring libation. She helps to arrange rendezvous with lovers (Wilkinson, 1883, vol. 3, plate 28, p. 118).

erect phallus be added and that he be worshiped as a god. Diodorus also stated (I, 88) that "... not only the Egyptians but not a few other peoples as well have in the rites they observe treated that male member as sacred on the ground that it is the cause of the generation of all creatures."

The association of lettuce with Min was not fortuitous; the Egyptians thought that lettuce was an aphrodisiac. Unlikely as it seems, it was firmly believed, and even today it is thought that one will have many children if one eats a lot of lettuce. Before you buy all the lettuce in Salinas Valley, let me give you the Greek version. They thought lettuce was an antiaphrodisiac. Athenaeus (1957) cites Amphis: "It was among the lettuce-plants, plague take them! Why, if a man not yet sixty should eat them when he desires commerce with a woman, he might twist and turn the whole night long without once accomplishing his desires, wring-

ing his hands against stern fate instead of acting like a man.” He cited others who claimed lettuce produces impotence (Athenaeus, 1957, II, 69). Augustus, the first Roman emperor, dedicated a statue to his physician, Antonius Musa, for curing him of being an hypochondriac, using lettuce as the treatment (Scotti, 1872; Pliny, n.h. XIX, 38; Leclerc, 1941).

The following quote from Pliny (n.h., XIX, 38) reveals a good deal about lettuce of the ancients:

The Greeks have distinguished three kinds of lettuce, one with so broad a stalk that it is said that the wicket-gates of kitchen gardens are often made of them; these plants have leaves rather larger than those of the green garden-lettuce, and extremely narrow, the nutriment being apparently used up elsewhere; the second kind has a round stalk, and the third is a squat-growing plant called the Spartan lettuce. . . . , while the worst kind of all has been given the name in Greek of bitter lettuce, in condemnation of its bitter taste. There is moreover another variety of white lettuce the Greek name for which is poppy-lettuce, from its abundance of juice with a soporific property, although all the lettuces are believed to bring sleep; this was the only kind of lettuce in Italy in early times, which accounts for the Latin name for lettuce, derived from the Latin for milk. A purple lettuce with a vary large root is called Caecilius's lettuce, while a round one with a very small root and broad leaves is called in Greek the antiaphrodisiac, or otherwise the eunuch's lettuce, because this kind is an extremely potent check to amorous propensities”

Here we find a rather good description of the tall, narrow leaved lettuce of the Egyptians, the bitter wild-type, and one especially potent as an antiaphrodisiac. Pliny specifies that the garden lettuce is green, implying that the tall kind is of another hue (blue?). According to Leclerc (1941), the “bitter herbs” of the Old Testament is translated in the Greek Septuagint as “wild lettuce.” But, how can the innocent, innocuous lettuce be a potent aphrodisiac to some and a potent antiaphrodisiac to others? The key is in the Latin name, *Lactuca*; the plant lactates by bleeding latex when broken or injured. The milky juice reminded the Egyptians of semen and, therefore, of fertility, procreation, and aphrodisiacal properties. The same juice reminded the Greeks of latex from the opium poppy that is soporific in nature and has the opposite effect. This also shows that people believe exactly what they want to believe.

Having worked my way through the stylized depictions of lettuce and its check-board gardens, the festivals of Min and the Greek antithesis, I rather thought the matter could rest in antiquity. Not so. There was a 19th century revival of interest in the medicinal properties of lettuce that is worthy of note.

It happens that this new interest in lettuce juice can be attributed to an American doctor in Philadelphia and a Scottish doctor in Edinburgh (Wood, 1868). The first, John Redman Coxe, published a paper in the Transactions of the American Philosophical Society (1799) with the remarkably pompous title: “Inquiry into the comparative effects of the *Opium Officinarum*, extracted from the *Papaver somniferum* or white poppy of Linnaeus; and of that procured from the *Lactuca sativa* or common cultivated lettuce of the same author.” In a masterpiece of self-deception, he convinced himself that lettuce juice had about the same properties as opium extract and was a lot cheaper and more available. The Scot, Dr. Andrew Duncan (1810) came to somewhat similar conclusions, described his method of extraction and coined the term “lactucarium” for the product.

Lactucarium soon became a standard item in the pharmacopoeia on both sides of the Atlantic. A small industry grew up, especially in France and Germany to

supply the commodity. Lettuce was allowed to bolt and the stalk repeatedly cut to collect the latex almost as if it were a *Hevea* rubber tree. Details are given in Kraemer (1907). Aubergier (1842) tested several species of *Lactuca* and found *L. altissima* to be remarkably productive of latex. The stems could reach 3 m in height and 4 cm in diameter. Pereira (1853), Husemann et al. (1884), and Kraemer (1907), among others, analyzed the product chemically without finding much except some weak organic acids and a little (very little) protein. Dr. Coxe published *The American Dispensatory* for many years, and as late as 1831 in the 9th edition resented the fact that Dr. Duncan had never given him credit for his “*anterior* remarks in the American Philosophical Society’s Transactions” (Coxe, 1831, p. 430).

The use of *Lactuca* latex died slowly. Wissowa and Kroll (1925) commented: “Heute ist dieser eingetrocknete Saft (lactucarium) nicht mehr gebräuchlich.” But Vignes (1932) as late as the 1930s reported considerable success in treating a variety of female disorders with lettuce extracts, but said that they should not be compared to opium, but rather to belladonna!

Although Coxe never referred to the ancients, it is hardly possible that he was not aware of them. The Greek herbal of Dioscorides was Englished by John Goodyear in 1655 and must have been well known to every Western medical man of the 18th century (Gunther, 1934). There it is stated about wild lettuce: “It is somewhat in virtue like unto the Poppy—[and it]—doth avert wanton dreams and veneries.”

Actually, the Greek version had never disappeared completely. Leclerc (1874) translated an Arabic medicinal treatise of the early 18th century in which the therapeutic properties of lettuce are described. Chomel (1782) claimed extracts of lettuce have soporific properties. Linnaeus, himself, was so convinced of the antiaphrodisiac qualities that he cited the case of a rich Englishman who very much wanted children. “He was told by his physician that the only way he could have children was to stop his use of lettuce which he very much abused” (Scotti, 1872).

SYCOMORE (ROMANCE)

The plant in question is the sycomore fig (*Ficus sycomorus* L.), not the American plane tree. The name derives from the Greek *Sykon* = fig and *Moro* = mulberry. The “fruit” of a fig is a syconium. Botanically, the true fruits are the drupelets that lodge between the teeth. It is said that in ancient Attica the export of figs was made illegal so that the local population could enjoy the entire crop. Such a law inevitably invited fig smugglers, and smuggling invites informers. A sycophant is one who tattles on fig smugglers.

Most figs are pollinated by wasps and the coevolution of wasp and fig is one of the most fascinating of biological phenomena. The common fig of commerce (*F. carica* L.) is usually pollinated by species of *Blastophaga*, although some cultivars are parthenocarpic and do not require pollination for fruit development. The process of caprification was well known from ancient times and was well described by Aristotle (Hist. Anim., V, 32:26). The females hatch in the wild-type caprifig, emerge from the syconium covered with pollen, fly to young syconia of the proper stage and force their way through the orifice. They lose their wings

and often parts of their antennae and foot segments in the process. They can deposit eggs in short-styled flowers only, but find upon entry into a syconium of a domesticated fig that man has played a cruel hoax on them. Man has selected cultivars with long-styled flowers only. The female wasp searches frantically for suitable places to deposit her eggs and pollinates the fig in the process. She soon dies without completing the life cycle which can only be done in the short-styled flowers of the caprifig (Eisen, 1901). The wasp has a natural preference for the caprifig so the process of caprification usually involves growing the wild-type separately and tying strings of caprifigs in the branches of the domesticated kind. The wasp then has no choice but to accept the cultivar with its long-styled flowers.

The pollination of the sycomore is more complex and remarkably elegant from an evolutionary point of view. The *Ceratosolen arabicus* males emerge from their galls inside the syconium before the females. They walk over to female galls and chew a hole through which they can insert the abdomen and fertilize the females while they are still in their galls. Each male fertilizes several females. Then, the males go to the distal end of the syconium where the male flowers are located and start cutting anthers. The females emerge and go to the cut anthers, open them, take out the pollen and stuff it into highly specialized pockets in the thorax. The males chew tunnels near the ostiole for the females to escape. The females leave, loaded with pollen, and the males die having performed their essential functions. The females find another syconium at the right stage, enter and deposit eggs in short-styled flowers while pollinating the long-styled ones (Wiebes, 1977). They actually take pollen out of the pollen pockets and apply it to the stigmas (Galil and Eisikowitch, 1969). The females die having completed their functions. Another species, *C. galili* has pollen pockets but does not fill them (Galil and Eisikowitch, 1969). What sort of selection advantage would induce the evolution of pollen pockets?

But in Egypt, elsewhere in North Africa, the Levant and Cyprus, the sycomore does not produce seed and all reproduction is man-assisted. In this region, the sycomore has wasps but they are the wrong species. *Sycophaga sycomori* L. behaves rather like the *Blastophaga* of the common fig but does not transport pollen. In fact, the wasps leave the syconium before the male flowers open (Galil, 1968). Shortly after eggs are laid in short-styled flowers and larvae begin to develop in the galls, another wasp, *Apocrypta longitarsus* Mayr lays its eggs in the same galls reaching them from outside the syconium with a very long, sensitive ovipositor. It is incapable of causing galls and never deposits an egg except in a gall already started by *S. sycomori*. The larvae of *Apocrypta* grow faster and cause the larvae of *S. sycomori* to die. It is a kind of parasitism something like that of cuckoos (Galil, 1967). From southern Sudan and Ethiopia southward, the pollinator wasps are present and seeds are produced.

The sycomore in Egypt does not produce seed but does produce a lot of wasp larvae. The ancients developed a technique to hasten ripening so that the fruit could be eaten before it was full of grubs. Theophrastus (h. p. IV, 1) wrote of the sycomore: "It cannot ripen unless it is scraped; but they scrape it with iron 'claws'; the fruits thus scraped ripen in four days." The prophet Amos was a professional fig scraper (Amos 7:14). The Hebrew word used is more accurately translated as "piercer" or "cutter" than scraper (Keimer, 1927). Henslow (1892), Keimer (1928) and Galil (1968) show figures of special knives used for the purpose in Egypt

where the practice of injuring the syconia to hasten ripening is still used. Careful examination of ancient Egyptian reliefs and paintings permits a distinction between common figs in the offerings and sycomore figs. The sycomores are always represented with a gash in each "fruit." Galil (1968) reported that after the syconium is cut it will grown grow very quickly increasing seven fold in size in 3–4 days.

The ancient practice of fig gashing is based on release of ethylene by injured fruit. Tomatoes are ripened artificially in Florida on a commercial scale by a similar procedure. In order to get uniform results, the fruits are picked gourd-green and if any should show signs of turning red, they are taken out on the sorting belts and treated separately. After washing and grading, the tomatoes are put in cartons and stacked in ripening chambers. Each chamber, in one of the plants I visited, held enough cartons to fill three huge semitrailer trucks. One liter of ethylene gas was sufficient for 12 h of ripening in each chamber. In Galil's experiments with sycomores, he found that one gashed fruit would ripen a plastic bag full of uninjured fruits (Galil, 1968).

As to the romance I promised, the sycomore was a sacred tree to the Egyptians and was inhabited by Hathor, the goddess of love (Keimer, 1929). To this day, an Egyptian woman with marital problems may linger under a sycomore in the hope that the spirit of the tree might render assistance (Brown and Walsingham, 1917). More specifically, the sycomore was a trysting tree; it was a place where lovers met. The tree has deep roots and can be found in the bottoms of dry washes at the edge of the desert, well isolated and secluded. As described by Maspero (1903, vol. 1, p. 39), "Its rounded masses of compact foliage are so wide-spreading that a single tree in the distance may give the impression of several grouped together; and its shade is dense, and impenetrable to the sun." The sycomore not only provided cool, deep shade and seclusion but actively participated in lovers' *rendezvous*. The tree can speak and conspire, as we can see in some selections (arranged by the author) from Egyptian love poetry (Kaster, 1968; Gothein, 1928).

GIRL:

Hurriedly scampers my heart when I recall my love of you—
 It does not allow me to go about like other mortals—
 It seems to have been uprooted from its place.
 It doesn't even let me put on my tunic or even take my fan—
 I am not able to paint my eyes or anoint myself with perfume,
 "Don't linger thus! Get back to yourself!"
 I say when I think of him.
 'Don't cause me silly pain, O my heart
 Why do you play the madman?
 Just sit cool and he'll come to you and everyone will see!
 Let not people say of me
 'There's a girl fallen hopelessly in love!
 Stand firm when you think of him,
 O my heart! don't bound about so!"

BOY:

Seven days I have not seen my sweetheart
 A sickness has crept into me; my limbs have become heavy and my body does not know itself.
 Even should the master physicans come to me, my heart would not be soothed by their remedies.

As for the magician-priests, there is no resource in them; my illness cannot be diagnosed.
 But say to me "Here she is!"—that will make me live again!
 Her name is what will revive me; the coming and going of her messengers is what will give life to
 my heart.
 She is better for me than a whole pharmacy!
 For me her coming would be the Sound Eye of Horus!
 When I see her I am well; when she opens her eyes, my limbs are young again;
 When she speaks, then I am strong; when I embrace her, she banishes evil from me.
 But, I have not seen her for seven days!

THE SYCOMORE:

O! little sycomore, which she planted with her own hand,
 She moves her lips to speak. How fair are her lovely branches!
 She is laden with fruits that are redder than jasper,
 Her shade is cool, she lays a little letter in a girl's hand.
 The head gardener's daughter; she bids her hasten to her lover:
 "Come and stay among my maidens, we are drunken if we would go to thee,
 Ah, before we have tasted anything, the servants who obey thee
 Are coming with their vessels; beer of every kind they bring
 And every kind of bread, many flowers of today and yesterday
 And all refreshing fruits. Come and make it fine today, [and]
 Tomorrow and next day, three days long—Sit in my shade!"
 Her friend sits on her right hand; she makes him drunk
 And yields to what he wishes—
 But I am dumb, and say not what I see;
 I will not say a word!

GIRL:

My god, my lover, my husband—
 How sweet it is to go down to the lotus pond and do as you desire—
 to plunge into the waters, and bathe before you—
 to let you see my beauty in my tunic of sheerest royal linen,
 all wet and clinging and perfumed with balsam!
 I go down into the water to be with you
 and come up again to you with a red fish
 lying so fine and splendid within my fingers
 and place it upon my breast—
 O, sweetheart! look and see!

BOY:

I see my sweetheart coming—
 My heart is in joy, and my arms are opened wide to embrace her;
 And my heart rejoices within me without ceasing
 Come to me, O my mistress!
 When I embrace her and her arms enlace me,
 it is as if I were in the Land of the Gods [Punt] drenched in her fragrance!
 When I kiss her with her lips parted Ah, then I am drunk without beer!

GIRL:

Is there anything sweeter than this hour?
 for I am with you, and you lift up my heart—
 for is there not embracing and fondling when you visit me
 and we give ourselves up to delights?
 If you wish to caress my thigh, then I will offer you my breast also—
 it won't push you away!

Would you leave because you are hungry?
 —are you such a man of your belly?
 Would you leave because you need something to wear?
 —I have a chestfull of fine linen!
 Would you leave because you wish something to drink?
 —Here take my breasts! They are full to overflowing and all for you!
 Glorious is the day of our embracing;
 I treasure it a hundred thousand millions!

It is not possible to read Egyptian love poetry and still think of the ancient Egyptians as stiff little figures walking across the tomb walls. They were *real, live*, flesh and blood people who *celebrated* sex and romance.

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